

## After the Coup - On resistance in Myanmar

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Kza win seemed to know how his life would end. 'Before the Revolution opened out,' he wrote in 'Skulls', his final poem, 'a bullet blew someone's brains out.' Eight days later, on 3 March 2021, security forces opened fire on a group of protesters in the city of Monywa, in central Myanmar. K Za Win was among them. A bullet hit him behind the ear. 'Skulls' seems prophetic, but K Za Win - a former monk and political prisoner - wasn't writing about himself. On 1 February, hours before the parliament elected in November 2020 was due to sit for the first time, the military launched a coup, arresting senior members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and the other parties that had won a resounding victory at the expense of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. President Win Myint, Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior political figures were detained along with their aides, and protests broke out across the country, including, for the first time, in Naypyidaw, the fortress capital built by the military in the mid-2000s. A 19-year-old supermarket worker, Mya Thwe Thwe Khine, was taking cover from water cannon in Naypyidaw when a police officer shot her in the head. She died in hospital on 19 February and images of her face soon started to appear on T-shirts and placards.

'Skulls' is included in *Picking Off New Shoots Will Not Stop the Spring*, a collection of poetry and essays that makes clear the transformation of Myanmar brought about by the coup and the nationwide resistance to it.\* In one essay *Suragamika*, a pseudonym for the writer and surgeon Ma Thida, writes of the military's violent response. 'Quite often, a person who was picked up at night would have to be collected from hospital the following morning as a dead body.' These bodies often showed signs of torture. 'The authorities claimed that the detainee had fallen thirty feet to his death while trying to escape from custody,' *Suragamika* says of Zaw Myat Lynn, a popular activist and NLD aide. 'And yet his body - eyes gouged out, facial skin flayed, teeth missing, tongue blackened and melted, internal organs absent, speaks volumes about the circumstances of his horrendous death.' To date, more than four thousand people have been killed by the security forces and pro-junta militias. The military has razed villages and shelled camps for internally displaced people. Twenty thousand people are being held in detention, 1.6 million have been internally displaced and tens of thousands have left the country.

Resistance to the coup began almost immediately. Doctors and healthcare workers at Mandalay General Hospital walked out the morning after the MPs were arrested. As the Civil Disobedience Movement grew over the following months, hundreds of thousands of civil servants joined the strike - including employees from the ministries of defence, home affairs and border affairs, which had remained under military control during the liberalisation of the previous decade. Disaffected police officers and soldiers resigned. Trade union members and workers in banks, hospitals, schools, factories and airports walked out. So did employees at oil refineries, leading to power cuts at military-run facilities. A Covid-19 vaccination drive was rejected, leading the Unicef country chief to write that she had 'never seen people so hostile to the authorities that they would refuse healthcare that they needed'. The State Administration Council (SAC), as the new junta named itself, attempted to lure back civil servants with promises of higher pay, as well as threats of dismissal and arrest. But the strike continued to spread, crippling the country's administrative system and economy. There were also boycotts of military-owned businesses, and a widespread refusal to pay tax contributed to a significant drop in government revenue.

In March 2021, 28 organisations – political parties, ethnic armed groups, women’s and youth groups and unions – formed the National Unity Consultative Council. The following month, it announced the establishment of a parallel administration, the National Unity Government (NUG), which included MPs from the NLD and other parties, as well as leaders of ethnic minority groups. The NUG began to act as a combination of pressure group and government-in-hiding, asking businesses to divert taxes to it, helping to provide basic public services in areas outside military control and encouraging foreign countries to recognise it as the legitimate government. The composition of the NUG, half of whose ministers were from ethnic minority and religious communities, mirrored what seemed to be happening among protesters. ‘We witnessed a solidarity we never thought existed in Burmese society,’ Suragamika writes.

The military crackdown was also intensifying, and in a single day in late March 2021 around a hundred people were killed across the country. Violent repression had helped put an end to the last nationwide uprising, in 2007. But this time, young people from a broad cross-section of society – students, labourers, bankers, civil servants, sailors, even soldiers – began to leave towns and cities for the rural border regions where ethnic forces opposed to the state have long been based. At training camps in the eastern and northern borderlands, members of the majority Bamar ethnicity learned guerrilla warfare tactics alongside Karen, Shan, Kachin and other ethnic groups ; in the west, they trained with Rakhine and Chin armies. Shows of cross-ethnic unity have occurred before in Myanmar’s recent history, but this was unprecedented : hundreds of People’s Defence Force (PDF) battalions and other civilian armed groups formed. Ye Myo Hein, a researcher at the United States Institute of Peace, estimated late last year that almost 100,000 civilians – roughly the number of combat-ready soldiers in Myanmar’s army – had joined an armed group since the coup.

Just as significant is the geography of the conflict. Since the coup, the fighting has been most intense in central Myanmar, in places like Monywa, where K Za Win was killed. Since independence in 1948, dozens of insurrections have been launched, for the most part by ethnic minority groups seeking self-determination and later autonomy within a federal system. Until now, these conflicts have largely been confined to the seven ‘ethnic states’ on the country’s western, northern and eastern/southeastern borders. Now, PDFs are striking at the Bamar heartland, which the military has long seen as secure. Bridges on key supply routes are being blown up ; military outposts have been seized in townships near Naypyidaw. The generals moved the capital there from Yangon in 2005 precisely because its site on the plains inhabited mostly by people of Bamar ethnicity reduced the risk of attacks. But the army’s grip is now loosening. In a massive operation launched in eastern Myanmar in late October, the Three Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic armies, supported by PDFs and rebel groups, seized more than 150 military positions, as well as several towns and border crossings. In Rakhine State in the west, the Arakan army, one of Myanmar’s largest rebel forces, launched a series of attacks in November that the International Crisis Group said might ‘open a significant new front’, with serious implications for the already overstretched military so soon after the actions in the east of the country. Since the regime first came to power more than half a century ago, it has taken just enough military action, or made just the right placatory offers, to hold off its opponents. But the danger posed by the alliance of PDFs and ethnic armed groups feels greater than any previous threat.

The decision by Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw – Myanmar’s armed forces – to end the decade-long experiment in liberalisation baffled even those who thought they understood something of the way the military operates. Its key political interests seemed to be secure. The 2008 constitution, drawn up during an earlier period of outright military rule, gave it 25 per cent of parliamentary seats, enough to veto any constitutional changes. Although Min Aung Hlaing ordered attacks on minorities in Kachin, Karen and Shan State soon after the start of the transition to a civilian government in 2011, he was still able to convince Western diplomats eager to

see a success story in Myanmar that their governments should end sanctions and invest in the country. After the military allowed the NLD to enter parliament in 2012, where it became the formal opposition – the first since the early 1960s – and then to form a government in 2016, it kept hold of key ministries. The generals always had ultimate control ; in this sense, the 2021 coup wasn't a fundamental break.

The military did have some reason to be concerned. Monitors in Myanmar and overseas had been building a proper picture of its finances, revealing not just that billions of dollars in earnings from commercial interests were being kept from the public, but also that money earned through partnerships with international firms was being funnelled to combat units implicated in mass atrocities. Had the NLD taken office in 2021, it would have pushed for reforms aimed at weakening the military's control of the financial sector. Yet the generals are so deeply embedded in both the legal and the illicit economy that this would have had only partial success. Perhaps the liberalisation period was only ever intended to last long enough for an injection of foreign capital to boost army reserves. Or perhaps the real aim was the destruction of Suu Kyi, and of all opposition to the military. Min Aung Hlaing, who was chosen to lead the junta after Than Shwe's retirement in 2011, sees himself as the sole guarantor of the country's unity and stability. But, as Mary Callahan has written, Min Aung Hlaing and Suu Kyi 'share more than they differ. Both are moral, economic, religious and social conservatives' who 'consider themselves the embodiment of the nation'. He was unable to accept the electorate's choice of Suu Kyi ; therefore, she and her party had to go.

Over the eight decades since the founding of the Tatmadaw, successive juntas have reduced it from a vaunted anti-colonial force to an institution interested only in maintaining the political and economic dominance of its leadership. General Ne Win, whose coup in 1962 established the military as the dominant political force, was a key figure in the campaign to force out the British, and remained popular even after deposing the country's first civilian government. Myanmar had been so fractious in the years after independence that the coup was viewed more as a rescue operation than a power grab. But, as Yoshihiro Nakanishi wrote in *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution : The State and the Military in Burma 1962-88*, Ne Win soon 'reinvented the state for his dictatorship'. Over the next quarter-century he ran the country into the ground, until discontent over his regime's economic mismanagement triggered a popular uprising in 1988. He was overthrown in an internal coup and the so-called State Law and Order Restoration Council took control. A generation of officers shaped by ruthless counterinsurgency operations, the new junta placed violence at the centre of its regime. Two decades of plunder and self-enrichment contributed to Myanmar's becoming one of the least developed countries in the world by the late 2000s. In 2010, the year before the liberalisation process began, life expectancy was 63, compared to 76 in neighbouring Thailand. Annual expenditure on healthcare was less than a dollar per person. Thousands of political activists were in jail ; the military was at war with more than a dozen armed groups, and had lost control over many border areas.

The cruelty and neglect of successive juntas caused great hardship, but it also made Myanmar's 55 million inhabitants less dependent on the state. The social and economic infrastructure the resistance now relies on filled that gap. The civil society organisations that have long provided vital public services have been working alongside PDFs and other non-military groups to deliver healthcare and education in areas where schools and hospitals have been turned into military bases (more than 90 occupations of health facilities have been recorded since the coup ; there have been 320 attacks on healthcare facilities this year), or are understaffed as a result of strikes and staff joining the PDFs. Meanwhile, the informal remittance systems that proliferated during previous periods of military rule have been used to send millions of dollars from diasporic Burmese to striking workers and destitute families, as well as to buy weapons from deserting soldiers and on the black market. The NUG has made a point of supplementing remittances with funds raised in a way that

mimics a functioning state. In February, it sold a lease for a military-controlled gems mine in central Myanmar to an anonymous buyer for \$4 million, on the understanding that the mining rights will only come into effect if the military is toppled. It has sold interest-free 'Spring Revolution bonds' and shares in military-owned real estate on a similar basis. The bonds have generated around \$50 million in revenue, according to the NUG, while taxes on landowners and businesses in liberated areas have brought in additional funding. In June the NUG launched the crypto-based Spring Development Bank, circumventing the SAC's control of the banking sector.

Not everyone who opposes the military agrees with the resistance's tactics. Critics claimed the walkouts by doctors and healthcare workers after the coup were a form of self-sabotage, noting that they left state hospitals barely functioning at a time when Covid-19 was rampant and the military was hoarding oxygen supplies. 'Fifty years of previous military rule failed to develop our health system and instead enshrined poverty, inequality and inadequate medical care,' a group of doctors wrote in a letter to the Lancet. 'We cannot return to this situation.' It wasn't a total stoppage : doctors, nurses and ambulance workers continued the tradition of providing care outside formal spaces, working in the streets or at clandestine mobile clinics set up, for instance, in shipping containers in industrial zones. Field medics moved between razed villages, and doctors made discreet home visits or used telemedicine to advise from afar.

There has been friction within the resistance movement over the targeted killings of military collaborators by PDFs. More than two thousand non-combatants have been killed in assassinations and bombings, despite an NUG code of conduct forbidding such actions. Some of the targets aren't directly connected to the junta - meter readers working for state-owned electricity companies, for instance. But the majority are military informants, known as *dalan*, who haunt teashops and workplaces, passing on what they overhear. The NUG, which has set up more than twenty prosecutors' offices in liberated areas, has sent a number of people to jail for killing these collaborators. But the body count continues to rise. The killings show two things the NUG has yet to address adequately : first, it has only nominal authority over many of its armed elements ; second, there is no clear consensus on which actions are justified. Some members of the resistance, especially those from ethnic minority communities, celebrate the PDFs for retaining their independence from national bodies. But any civilian government that wants to unify Myanmar society will face a conundrum : how to deal with the crimes committed by its own side without turning the groups that have joined together to fight the junta against one another.

Another remarkable feature of this period has been the central role played in the resistance by marginalised groups - young women in particular - and the alliances forged across religious and ethnic lines. But this unity seems fragile. It was only six years ago that a broad cross-section of society backed the army's genocidal attacks on the Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Rakhine State in the west of the country. With the help of civilians, the army drove 750,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh, burned more than 350 villages and killed more than 10,000 people over a period of just a few months. The campaign revealed that many in Myanmar who had long opposed the military's brutality were capable of excusing it in certain situations. When the attacks began, NLD members began repeating the regime's claims that the Rohingya were interlopers from Bangladesh who fabricated tales of atrocities in order to win international sympathy. Suu Kyi even travelled to The Hague in 2019 to defend Min Aung Hlaing and his subordinates against allegations of genocide. But since the coup, opinion has shifted. The NUG released a statement in 2021 declaring that the 'entire people of Burma is sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingya as all now experience atrocities and violence perpetrated by the military', pledged to begin the repatriation of Rohingya refugees when it is safe to do so and in July this year appointed a prominent Rohingya activist, Aung Kyaw Moe, as a deputy minister.

The NUG is more representative of Myanmar society than the NLD, which was a vehicle for elite

Bamar domination. But its statement on the Rohingya isn't entirely convincing. The wording of the statement ignores the real reasons the Rohingya genocide went largely unopposed. Those who disbelieved Rohingya claims of atrocities did so not because they thought the military incapable of such actions, but because of an ingrained belief that nothing the Rohingya said - most of all their claim to have been living in Myanmar for centuries - was to be trusted, and that they would do anything to claim a citizenship they didn't deserve. It followed, therefore, that their reports of massacres and gang rapes must be false. So deeply held were these views that many people proved willing to support the campaign of mass killing and expulsion. Attitudes may well have changed, but it would be rash to assume that this is a long-term shift.

In March last year, as the generals gathered in Naypyidaw for Armed Forces Day, Min Aung Hlaing spoke of his intention to 'annihilate' the resistance. According to most measures, the war is intensifying. The UN reported in August that civilians and resistance fighters are being killed in detention with growing frequency. The military has also destroyed more than 75,000 buildings of all kinds across the country, with soldiers sometimes returning to the same town as many as a dozen times to finish the job. There are regular reports of civilian massacres, suggesting that collective punishment - long a military practice - is now effectively state policy. The nature of the fighting has also evolved. As resistance groups have become more capable of launching attacks, the junta has begun to carry out more airstrikes : last year there were more than three hundred, triple the number of the previous year ; the total for this year will be even higher. In April a vacuum bomb - which sucks oxygen from the air to trigger a massive explosion - was dropped on the village of Pazigy in lower Sagaing Region, a resistance stronghold where hundreds of people had gathered to mark the opening of a local PDF office. Scores were killed in the initial strike ; then a helicopter gunship strafed people trying to flee, bringing the total death toll to more than 150. Among them were school children who had been taking part in a ceremonial dance. For several days afterwards, helicopters and jets flew over the village, preventing anyone from retrieving the body parts. Nine days later, the village was bombed again.

It's clear that there won't be a peaceful resolution to the war. Any attempt to set up alternative state structures is now treated as an act of treason, as the obliteration of Pazigy showed. The stunning success of the Three Brotherhood Alliance operation meanwhile reveals operational weaknesses that the military has tried to hide by acting with ever greater aggression : jets have pounded the territory seized in eastern Myanmar, 50,000 civilians have been displaced and unknown numbers have died. The pattern of heavy losses spurring extreme violence is a familiar one. Efforts by Western powers to undermine the junta have been sluggish : last month the US followed the European Union in imposing a ban on financial transactions with the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, a major source of revenue for the junta ; the UK and others have also sanctioned individuals and companies supplying arms to the SAC. The former will impede a key source of funding ; the latter will have limited effect. Since the coup, the junta has imported weapons and equipment worth more than \$1 billion, mainly from Russia and China. Myanmar's neighbours have been either unwilling or unable to take meaningful action. ASEAN, which holds the greatest leverage with the junta, initially barred it from senior-level meetings, but continued to allow it to co-chair, with Russia, its counterterrorism working group. A five-point peace plan drawn up by the bloc in 2021 has been a resounding failure, and in June the Thai government pushed for ASEAN to re-engage with the generals. But Min Aung Hlaing's reference to annihilation shows that his strategy for ending this conflict doesn't involve much talking.

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<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n23/francis-wade/after-the-coup>
- Francis Wade is a journalist and author of Myanmar's Enemy Within : Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'